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“THE EVIL WAS CENTERED AROUND 110TH STREET”: BLACK WOMEN SEX WORKERS, ENTREPRENEURIAL ECONOMIES, AND MORALITY IN PROGRESSIVE ERA NEW YORK CITY

Savannah Jacobson

Mentor: Douglas Flowe

My project examines black women sex workers in Progressive Era New York City. I ask why black women turned to sex work, and what happened to them when they did? First, I look at the context in which black women sex workers in New York City lived. I explore the effect of the Great Migration on New York City, and particularly in the creation of the city's two most black neighborhoods, Harlem and the Tenderloin District. I further contextualize these women within the white slavery panic that characterized the Progressive Era. Using this setting, I investigate how black women sex workers thought of their own lives. I question how they conceptualized their work: Did sex work become an integral part of how these women formed their identity, or was it simply a source of supplementary income? Then, I explore the perception of black women sex workers, from their neighbors and spouses, to local and federal government. To answer these questions, I turn to the Committee of Fourteen archives housed in the New York Public Library. The Committee itself, as a leading investigative reform group during the Progressive Era, provided fertile ground to conduct research. I explore how the Committee of Fourteen conducted their work, and the effect that their widespread surveillance made on black women sex workers. My project argues that black women sex workers were acutely aware of the stereotypes against them as blacks, women, and sex workers, and propagated these images themselves to firstly, subvert the surveillance state perpetuated by Progressive Era morality reformations and secondly, create thriving entrepreneurial economies.